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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000966

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR AND JUSTICE MINISTER DISCUSS HUMAN  
RIGHTS, NARCOTICS, SAUDI ARABIA, RUSSIAN ARMS TRAFFICKER

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Justice Minister Somphong Amornwiwat told the Ambassador March 26 he was directing his Ministry (MOJ) to reexamine the case of disappeared Muslim lawyer Somchai Neelapajit; MOJ personnel would continue providing protection for Somchai's wife, and Somphong hoped to meet with her in the near future. The Ambassador expressed USG support for counternarcotics efforts, while stressing they should be consistent with the rule of law; Somphong described the MOJ's role in the upcoming "war on drugs" and assured the Ambassador the RTG would adhere to the law. Somphong said he was investigating cold cases that had cast a pall over Thai-Saudi relations. He said he expected court action in the case of Russian arms trafficker Viktor Bout in two to three weeks. End Summary.

MISSING LAWYER HIGH ON MOJ'S AGENDA

¶2. (C) The Ambassador paid his first formal call on Justice Minister Somphong Amornwiwat on March 26. When the Ambassador asked which issues were currently atop the Ministry's agenda, Somphong first cited the high profile case of missing Muslim lawyer Somchai Neelapajit, saying his Ministry would undertake further investigation into Somchai's disappearance. The Ambassador stressed that there was great interest in the U.S. and other countries about Somchai's fate. The USG recognized the secession movement in southern Thailand was a domestic Thai issue, the Ambassador said, but human rights issues relating to the South often drew international attention; RTG efforts to resolve the Somchai case would help Thailand to address international concerns regarding Thailand's commitment to bring human rights violators to justice.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador expressed USG concern about the safety of Angkana Neelapajit, Somchai's wife. Somphong explained that the MOJ's Department of Special Investigations (DSI) had

two teams providing protection for Angkana; he said he himself had corrected the record when a European Union representative had complained to him that she was no longer being protected. Somphong had communicated his desire to meet with Angkana, and he hoped that she would agree and meet with him within two weeks.

"WAR ON DRUGS"

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¶4. (C) Citing People's Power Party pledges to renew a "war on drugs," the Ambassador said the USG supported counternarcotics efforts, but it was important for any campaign to adhere to the rule of law. Somphong assured the Ambassador that he was aware of the human rights concerns surrounding the Thaksin-era counternarcotics drive, and the RTG would "not let it happen like in the past" but would act in accordance with the law.

¶5. (C) The RTG had held a meeting on March 21 to formulate its counternarcotics policy, Somphong said; the details would be made clear to the implementing agencies in an April 2 meeting at Government House. The MOJ's effort would focus on coordinating the work of its counternarcotics, revenue, and money laundering units, so they could focus on approximately 200 persons on a "blacklist," examining not only those people's assets, but those of their relatives and close associates as well, and probe further when transactions could not be explained. While the MOJ would play a major supporting role in investigations, the Interior Ministry and Police would do much of the field work. Somphong noted parenthetically that the DEA office at the Embassy provided significant assistance to the MOJ.

SAUDI CASES

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¶6. (C) Somphong also explained that he would energize the DSI to work on cold cases that had cast a pall over Thai-Saudi relations. There were three seemingly linked but technically distinct cases: one concerned missing gems stolen from the Saudi royal family by a Thai migrant worker in 1989. Another involved the 1990 murder of three Saudi diplomats in Bangkok. The third pertained to a Saudi businessman missing since ¶1990.

¶7. (C) Somphong stressed the importance of Saudi Arabia as the leading Persian Gulf country, and remarked that Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama, on his visit to Washington earlier that month, had requested that the USG use its good offices to help improve Thai-Saudi ties. (Somphong did not reiterate that request to the Ambassador, however.) Citing a meeting two weeks previously with the Saudi Charge d'Affaires in Bangkok, Somphong said he hoped to provide the Saudis with a "concrete answer" in the cases in question, even if this meant admitting that some issues could never be resolved.

RUSSIAN ARMS TRAFFICKER

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¶8. (C) As the meeting concluded, Somphong told the Ambassador that he expected further news in 2 - 3 weeks about the prospective extradition to the U.S. of Russian arms trafficker Viktor Bout. The Ambassador said he appreciated the RTG's cooperation on the Bout case; he understood that it was necessary to await the outcome of court proceedings.

COMMENT

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¶9. (C) We doubt that the government will turn up new evidence in the case of missing lawyer Somchai, but we will continue to encourage RTG efforts to resolve his fate, punish those behind his disappearance, and protect his wife. Somphong

seemed to recognize clearly the basis for our concern about possible extralegal measures in a new counternarcotics campaign, and we will continue to watch closely how the new "war on drugs" develops.

JOHN